

Galatians 2

Today we continue in our series on the Up, In, and Out of our church values focusing on the In or community aspect. Last week Reverend Grant shared from Chapter 1 in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Today we jump into Galatians 2.

In this part of the letter Paul makes an argument against a group of people that opposed him on a specific issue – the nature of the gospel as it impacts the place of the law and the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul writes in Galatians 1.7 that some people had come into the church community who were trying to cause confusion and pervert the gospel by preaching 'another gospel'. That other gospel is that faith in Jesus, plus the observance of the law, including circumcision (2.3; 6.12), is required for all followers of Jesus. This would have significant impact for the church and its people and the gospel.

Paul challenges this position by reminding the Galatian church of the core nature of the gospel. Let's look at how Paul does this and what we can learn from it today as a church and as followers of Jesus. In this first part of the message I want to outline Paul's argument as it is crucial to understanding Paul's message.

Paul opens chapter 2 by arguing that his apostleship is legitimate and fully consistent with what is taught in the church in Jerusalem by the apostles there. In Galatians 2.7-9 Paul tells of a meeting he, Barnabas and Titus had with the Jerusalem church leaders and that these leaders *"recognised that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised. 8 For God, who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised, was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles. 9 James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognised the grace given to me."* Paul assures his readers that the gospel he was preaching was in line with the Jerusalem church leaders and his mission was blessed by them. Paul writes in 2.3 that in the meeting with the church leaders, which would have included Peter, that even though Titus was a Gentile Christian these Jewish church leaders did not require Titus to be circumcised in order to have table fellowship with him as required by Jewish law. Paul establishes clearly that the gospel he has been teaching is indeed in line with the apostles in Jerusalem.

So what was the gospel that Paul was preaching and so strongly defending? Paul writes in 2.16 *"that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified."* Justification with God was through faith in Christ not the law. In this case the 'works of the law' is a reference to the observance of the law which all Jews were required to live by and many Jewish Christians continued to observe. It would appear that Paul was under attack for not requiring his Gentile converts to follow the practice of the law including circumcision, ritual food and purity laws. His opponents preached that all Gentile Christians must live according to the law in order to be justified before God and be in community with Jewish Christians.

Paul believed this to be wrong in light of the significance of Jesus' death and its implications for Christian community.

First Paul writes in verses 19-21 that, *"For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live*

in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (2.19-21)

Paul’s argument is that Christ’s life, death and resurrection fundamentally changed the way in which God relates to God’s people. The law was no longer the means by which God’s people maintained relationship with God and with each other. Reconciliation with God through being justified before God is through Christ alone. Relationship with God is now based on God’s amazing grace which is entered into through faith in Christ because of all that Jesus achieved through his life, death and resurrection. Since all followers of Jesus are in relationship with God on the same basis, not through the law, but through Christ, they can be in community and fellowship with God and one another.

The second related aspect Paul addresses in this passage is a confrontation he had with the apostle Peter. He writes in 2.12-13, *“For before certain men came from James, he (Peter) used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. 13 The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.”* It appears that despite what we read of in Acts 15 where Peter had a revelation about clean and unclean things and the breaking down of fellowship barriers between Jews and Gentiles, Peter went against his own beliefs and practice because of pressure from others. For Paul, Peter’s actions were both inconsistent with the new covenant in Christ and were damaging to both the witness to Jesus and Christian unity through breaking fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul is clear that the good news of the gospel meant that there was not to be two categories of Christian. Jesus himself taught in John 17.21 that his followers were to be one as he and the father were one. Paul writes in Galatians 3.28 that in the kingdom of God there are no longer male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile, or in Dutch terms there is no *allochtoon* or *autochtoon*. This message of oneness in Christ was central to the gospel and based on what the life, death and resurrection meant for the church community and also to their witness to Jesus. Without it there would be divisions, no basis for unity and no freedom in Christ. We all come to God through Jesus and maintain relationship with one another on the same basis – we are all one in Christ.

So, what is the significance of all of this for us today here in All Saints.

Firstly, what Paul writes is good news for us and indeed for all people. First reconciliation with God is possible because of all that Jesus did through his life, death and resurrection. We all come to God on the same basis – it is not Jesus plus something else such as law, good works, position in society or ethnicity. We all come together as followers of Jesus on the same basis – faith in Christ. I have just come back from a time in Australia where I had the privilege of worshiping in 8 different churches, all different in flavour – yet in each we could worship and fellowship together because we are one in Christ. In this community of All Saints though we come from many nations, Christian traditions and backgrounds, we are all one in Christ on an equal footing. It can be easy to focus on the differences or the things that divide us, but Paul’s teaching on the Gospel tells us that when we worship, when we share life together, we do so as one people in Christ. These differences can be enriching if we are curious enough to listen to and learn from other people’s experiences with God. This is especially so as we meet in smaller settings such as life groups or over a meal. Since we are one in Christ as we share and learn from others our unity can grow.

Extending this idea of the significance of the core gospel message is that it is very easy as our walk with God continues that we begin to add things along the way to faith in Christ. This is what Peter and others slipped into. I must do this or that to be accepted by God and fellowship with other Christians – I *must* serve, I *must* give, I *must* do good deeds, I *must* attend church. This turns into a works-based relationship with God. All of these are in themselves good things and should be a part of our walk with God, but we don't do them to earn God's favour – this is a faith plus mentality. We do them in response to all Christ has done for us – they are acts expressing our love for God and for one another motivated by God's amazing grace towards us in Christ. Paul understands his own ministry as a grace gift from God not a way to earn favour with God. This creates a freedom in our community where our service to God is motivated not out of strict duty, guilt or compulsion but by love for God and God's people. Faith in Christ is the starting point with service and good deeds flowing out of that fundamental relationship as a response to God's grace to us in Christ.

This leads to a final thought about discipleship and community. Paul's account of challenging Peter serves as an illustration that we all have a role in spurring one another on in our walk with God. Paul's challenge of Peter was done not just to assert authority but to help Peter learn and grow in his walk with God. We learn from this that we all have a role to disciple each other in the faith. Later in Galatians 6.2 Paul tells the church to *Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ* and in verse 9 he encourages them *not to become weary of doing good*. Paul's use of the term *law of Christ* is usually taken to refer to the two greatest commandments records Jesus mentions of loving God and loving our neighbour (Matt 22.37-40). Carrying one another's burdens and doing good is an expression of our love for God and each other. Christian community is to be marked by mutual exhortation and accountability. We support and spur one another on in our walk with Jesus through loving one another and doing good deeds – we are agents of God's love and grace to one another. Through using our spiritual gifts, through the teaching that we do on Sundays, through a word of encouragement, through sharing a cup of coffee over a good conversation, through listening to one another, through sharing in life groups and serving each other in other ways, we are in Paul's words fulfilling the law of Christ through showing a love towards one another. This is what I see and experience here in All Saints. This is what community and discipleship looks like – helping one another in love and grace to honour and glorify God in our daily walk with Jesus.

God's design is that we live the life of faith in community with others. It is not always comfortable as Paul's encounter with Peter reveals. Yet at the core of the gospel that Paul presents in this letter is God's amazing grace and love revealed in Christ. We worship and share the journey of faith together as equals in that grace and love, building community, sharing one another's burden and joys, spurring each other on in our walk and discipling each other in the faith.